




**international
socialist**

No. 16 February 1970
.20 East Coast, .15 West

WALLER PRESS  192

SDS: Desolation Row



**Crisis in the Subways
Reign of Terror in UMW
Czech Manifesto - Poland
Women's Lib. at Berkley**

AFT Radical Caucus Forms in California

Richard Broadhead

A Radical Caucus within the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) was formed at the annual convention of the California Federation of Teachers (CFT) in late December. With active participation by 60 of the 240 delegates, the Radical Caucus ran a full slate of candidates on a platform of democratic, militant, rank and file unionism, launched a demonstration against the appearance of San Francisco mayor (and then gubernatorial hopeful) Joseph Alioto, and laid plans for organizing activities across the state.

The Radical Caucus doesn't view itself as a traditional union opposition group. It has a perspective for independent activity and for joint action with student, community and other groups. At the same time, it recognized that building a base among teachers can be carried on most effectively through activity within the AFT.

West of the Mississippi the AFT has nothing like the strength it wields in the major cities of the East and Mid-west. In California, no AFT local has a collective bargaining agreement and there have been only a handful of strikes -- Richmond 1967, Parks Job Corp. Center 1967, San Francisco State 1968-9, U.C. Berkeley 1969. In the elementary, secondary schools AFT membership ranges from 10 to 20% of the teachers. During the last five years the union has been growing at a relatively constant 10% a year (i.e., from 1 to 2% of the total number of teachers are recruited each year).

At the junior college, state college and university level, the AFT is generally weak or non-existent, with the exception of the teaching assistant (graduate students) local at U.C. Berkeley and the two locals (faculty and student employees) at San Francisco State College. In both of these cases, the growth of the union was a direct outgrowth of a militant mass student movement.

On many campuses where the AFT is small and without real strength, what members there are often have roots in the student movement, as do many young AFT teachers in the public schools. While the AFT in California is a relatively small union with some 15,000 members, it has a large percentage of left-liberal to radical members. This fact makes it possible for radical teachers and for the AFT as a whole to play an important role both in the schools and in the trade union movement.

The potential for such a role was underlined by the formation of the Radical Caucus at the CFT Convention. On the afternoon marking the beginning of the convention, a call for a Radical Caucus was put out over the names of seven union members from six locals around the state. The call noted the need for "radical solutions to deal with problems of racism, poverty, militarism, and corporate and bureaucratic domination" and the importance of organizing "within the Union to combat the tendency of the union bureaucracy toward accommodation with the conservative leaders of the labor movement." Nearly a quarter of the delegates showed up for the first meeting.

A proposal to put together a platform and elect a slate of candidates to oppose the present leadership fell on fertile ground. The platform calls for 1) Militant, democratic trade-unionism; 2) Community control of schools and police; 3) Independent political action against the Democratic and Republican parties; 4) An end to U.S. imperialism, immediate withdrawal from Vietnam and all foreign countries; for a national work stoppage on April 15; 5) An end to political repression; defence of the Black Panther Party; 6) Defence of academic freedom and civil liberties for teachers and students; 7) Draft counselors in all colleges and secondary schools, and 8) Free child care centers for all.

After the platform was put together, a slate of candidates was elected. People were chosen primarily on the basis of participation in the platform discussion. A leaflet was put out listing the platform and candidates, prefaced by a statement criticizing the narrow bureaucratic nature of present trade union leadership and calling for social unionism and independent political action as the only perspective from which "teachers and other workers can fight effectively for their own interests."

In the voting, which took place after the demonstration against Alioto, the presidential candidate received 25% of the vote. There were four vice-presidential positions; the top vote-getter of the Radical Caucus -- a

black Chicano woman -- got 46% of the vote, while the lowest of the four got 20%. The Radical Caucus clearly represented a significant portion of the convention delegates, although its members understood that a great deal of work was necessary to organize comparable strength among the rank and file.

Each year the CFT invites a "notable" to address its main luncheon. In 1964 Mario Savio was the speaker. This year it was Joseph Alioto. The act of inviting Alioto was symbolic of the narrow, bureaucratic and impotent character of the CFT leadership's outlook.

Alioto has been a "pro-labor Democrat" since he won mayorship of San Francisco in 1967 with the not unimportant backing of the San Francisco Labor Council and Harry Bridges of the independent International Longshore and Warehousemen's Union. While on good terms with the labor "leaders," Alioto, like the bureaucrats, is an active opponent of militant rank-and-file trade union activity.

A critical case in point was the student-AFT strike at San Francisco State in 1968-69. Under the guise of preventing further "violence" (i.e., a few broken windows) and to insure "normal functioning" (i.e., law and order), Alioto sent the infamous Tac Squad and hundreds of other police to the campus to break that strike.

Alioto's use of police terror against the strike came in spite of the fact that the AFT had received strike sanction for its strike from the San Francisco Central Labor Council, and in spite of Alioto's own admission -- midway through the strike -- that there were real student and labor grievances involved in the strike.

In his two years in political office, Alioto has also managed to 1) send the Tac Squad against a hospital workers strike and 2) walk through a picket line of grape strikers in order to go to a luncheon on a grape-carrying line's ship -- Harry Bridges walked with him, so it was okay.

The day before the CFT Convention luncheon there was a heated fight over a proposal to retract the Alioto invitation. CFT President Raoul Teillet had the gall to claim he didn't know such a furor would be raised when the invitation was issued in September. The bureaucratic mentality is such that Teillet was probably sincere.

Apparently Alioto was invited because he is helping the public school local in San Francisco get a collective bargaining agreement with the school board. Jim Ballard, president of the local and now CFT vice-president, defended the invitation on this ground. But even from the point of view of the CFT leadership the invitation had serious problems.

At the time of the invitation, Alioto was assumed to be running for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. Jesse Unruh, long-time powerhouse in the California Democratic Party, was his chief opponent and looked like the probable winner; Alioto himself subsequently came to the same conclusion and dropped out of the running -- much to the surprise, presumably, of the CFT bureaucrats.

To endorse a candidate so early, especially the likely loser, was to get way out on a long limb. Apparently the CFT leadership has little intention of trying to accomplish anything at the state level, even in their own dealing-at-the-top fashion.

The demonstration protesting Alioto's appearance was a loud one. Singing and chanting by 50 to 60 delegates was punctuated by back-handed comments directed at those who walked through the line into the luncheon. The line surrounded a television interview of the mayor with a high-volume chant of "Alioto must go."

The demonstration was very important in building an attitude of militant opposition within the group. It also brought to the surface some of the political differences within the caucus. When the television cameras arrived some of the picketers made a concerted and momentarily successful attempt to end the demonstration. They didn't want the Radical Caucus to appear as "rowdy

and irresponsible."

Underneath this argument was a desire to maintain working relationships with the CFT leadership. "We don't want to overly embarrass them." The picket line adjourned to a nearby room, but returned shortly -- most of those who called for the disbanding had gone to eat. The reconstituted line was somewhat smaller but managed to continue its "rowdy activities."

The last meetings of the caucus were devoted to setting up a state structure and discussing local organizing activities. A state steering committee was elected, and a newsletter was projected, as were two meetings, one in May and one in the fall. The serious task facing the group is that of building active organizations within the locals -- especially in the urban centers. To succeed, such groups will have to do more than propagandize -- they must find issues around which action can be organized.

The importance of the Radical Caucus is that it provides a concrete way of integrating local struggles with a state-wide (and national) perspective. Without this broader perspective and the possibility of implementing it, only minor reforms can be won in one school district. No school district has or can get the money to finance real changes, and no one district has the numbers of students, teachers and community groups necessary to wrest control of the schools from the corporate powers which -- directly and indirectly -- control public education.

Recognition of all this does not imply abstention from or opposition to local struggles. Radicals should actively participate in struggles for community control of the schools and similar issues. [See the IS pamphlet, *Crisis in the Schools: Teachers and the Community*, for a full discussion of Community control and other topics.]

One issue of particular importance which the Radical Caucus must address is the question of mergers of AFT locals with their long-time conservative opponents -- the local affiliates of the National Education Association (NEA). What appears to be at stake in these mergers is not the question of striking or collective bargaining -- several NEA locals in the East and Mid-west have won contracts through strikes -- but the general question of unionism itself.

While strikes and contracts certainly are part of unionism, they do not a union make. The California Nurses Association (CNA) has conducted several serious strikes and won contracts during the past two years. But no one, at least no radical, would consider the CNA a genuine union. Not only do the nurses -- only RN's are in CNA -- lack a conception of themselves as workers, they do not have any ties with the organized labor movement.

This is the critical point. Teachers as an isolated group have little power in society. The ability of teachers to link up with the rest of the working class is critical for the success of teachers' struggles. (The same is true for any group of workers.) Having formal ties with the rest of the trade union movement is crucial for radicals within the AFT who hope to influence the rest of the labor movement.

National AFT president Dave Selden is a big advocate of these mergers. A year ago the AFT proposed merger talks to the NEA, but at that time the NEA said no thanks. The AFT-CFT leadership may see the mergers as a means of maintaining their dues payments while effectively destroying the local organizations -- and thus any opposition to the state and national leadership. Without functioning locals, it is extremely difficult to organize militant rank-and-file groups which could oppose the state and national leadership.

Whatever the reasoning of the AFT leadership -- and it should be emphasized that the notion of merger is coming only from the top down -- it is clear that radicals must vigorously oppose any moves which will cut teachers away from the rest of the trade union movement.

Whether the Radical Caucus will be able to sink roots in the rank and file and become a serious force will be determined in the coming months. As the crisis in the schools intensifies, the choices open to teachers narrow. When the action begins, the present liberal leadership of the AFT will opt for law and order, as they did in New York.

If there is no serious challenge to their leadership, the bureaucrats will surely succeed. But if there is an organized challenge from the Left which breaks from the confines and commitments of liberalism, then at least there is a chance for teachers and the AFT to play an important role in the struggle for decent schools and a better society.